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ABSTRACT

Oral communication competence is essential for career success and for effective participation as a citizen in a democratic society. Unfortunately, many students do not have oral communication competence, and even more unfortunately the success of graduating students rests heavily on their communication skills. Oral communication competence, presentation ability, interpersonal skills, teamwork skills, and leadership are more important in predicting success than a graduate's knowledge of functional disciplines. Some higher learning institutions have awakened to the importance of oral communication. For example, the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accreditation requirements now include oral communication in the curriculum. Indiana University developed new courses for Fall 1995 in listening and oral and written communications, making certain that presentation assignments and teamwork are infused in classes throughout the curriculum. Other higher learning institutions around the country are taking steps to ensure oral communication requirements. Three of the more popular approaches to help ensure communication competency are: (1) the recommended basic speech communication course; (2) oral communication across the curriculum, using one of two types of courses: communication intensive (CI) or speaking intensive (SI); and (3) use of a laboratory, in most cases in conjunction with the "across the curriculum" approach--also referred to as a multiple approach. One study found that approximately 20 universities have implemented the "across the curriculum" program. The best known university for its implementation of a laboratory is Radford University. (Contains 14 references.) (CR)

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Oral Communication Across Disciplines:

Adding Value to Academic Pursuit and Marketability

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Running Head: COMMUNICATION ACROSS DISCIPLINES

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Communication is a part of every person's everyday life. According to a *Report to the Subcommittee of the Educational Policies Board, Speech Communication Association* entitled "Oral Communication in the Undergraduate General Education Curriculum," communication is essential to human beings' lives. "The use of symbols underlies individual thought and communication with the family, school, work, and society . . . Therefore, the degree to which individuals and the groups of which they are a part use effective communication influences every facet of human life" (p. 3). "Oral communication competence is essential for career success and for effective participation as a citizen in a democratic society" (p. 1), and as such, this competence can affect success more than anything else.

All of the skills students have learned in their functional areas -- accounting, engineering, criminology, sociology -- can be useless if they cannot express what they know. The need for communicating effectively then becomes one of the most important things a student can learn in college. "Students must study and practice communication in order to achieve . . . competence; it does not come naturally and, by and large, college graduates are not sufficiently competent in oral communication" (*Report*, p. 1).

Unfortunately many students do not have oral communication competence, and even more unfortunately the success of graduating students rests heavily on their communication skills. Oral communication, presentation ability, interpersonal skills, teamwork skills and leadership are "more important in predicting success than a graduate's knowledge of functional disciplines" (Indiana University, 1994, p. 14). And Perrigo and Gaut (1994) found that human resource professionals

find the following communication skills necessary for new hires getting and keeping a professional level job: "ability to communicate," "listening effectively," and "teamwork capabilities."

Robert Klaeger believes that the first thing one should look at when hiring employees is communication skills, i.e., listening and verbal ability (Video Manager, 1986, p. 14). Treece (1994) claims that communication may determine a business student's success more than any other knowledge or skill. And *Harvard Business Review* reports, "By executives' own vote, no aspect of a manager's performance is of greater importance to his success than communication . . . By the facts, however, no part of business practice receives less formal and intelligent attention" (p. 133). As this paper will show, the emphasis on communication as a necessity is found over the variety of journals, conferences, reports, and professions.

> Peter Drucker, a well-known author and business consultant says,
>
> as soon as you move one step from the bottom, your effectiveness depends on your ability to reach others through the spoken or written word . . . In the very large organization . . . this ability to express oneself is perhaps the most important of all the skills a person can possess. (Lesikar, p. 6)

He also says that few students bother to learn these skills (Lesikar, p. 6). Perhaps they are not given the opportunity. Their schools may not be offering courses that teach these communication skills which are so essential for student success. But students must be "taught that a majority of their work days are spent communicating, so the ability to communicate adequately in order to function productively during a majority of their careers is crucial" (Howard, 1994, p.3). So, if these are the skills that students need to ensure their marketability and success, then higher

learning institutions need to ensure that students have an opportunity to master these skills -- to prepare themselves for their careers. Yet some students seem to be slipping through the cracks.

Fortune magazine reports that fewer than 20% of managers consider themselves effective communicators. They are willing to learn, but who is going to teach them (Gross, 1993, p. 21)? New hires apparently do not possess the communication skills that firms need, and corporations are being forced to develop their own programs to train their employees to communicate (Warner, p. 54). Though referring to writing, Fielden (1991) discussed graduates' inability to communicate when he wrote that in response to the question "What's the most troublesome problem you have to live with," business people were responding, "People just can't write. What do they learn in college now?" (p. 25) Interestingly, this article was written in 1964 and reprinted in 1991 to emphasize the lack of change in graduates' learning.

Fortunately for students, some higher learning institutions have awakened to the importance of oral communication. The *Report to the Subcommittee, SCA* stated "that such a fundamental aspect of human development as oral communication be left untended is unthinkable. The cultivation of oral communication skills is paramount to the education and welfare of all people, without exception." (p. 3). Also fortunately, this committee is not alone in its beliefs.

Business leaders, educators, authors, and academic organizations are beginning to understand the importance of offering students a chance to increase their marketability and skills. "Based on observations by business and education leaders . . . college graduates do not possess adequate written and oral skills" (Cronin and Glenn, 1991, p. 356). But moves are being taken to ensure that this changes. Reports which stress the need for speaking and listening as basic skills to be focused on include "the National Commission on Excellence, the National Commission on

Higher Education Issues, the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, the College Board, the Twentieth Century Fund, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and the Paideia Proposal" (Friedrich, 1991, np).

Also, the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accreditation requirements now include oral communication in the curriculum. Since many business schools will strive for this accreditation, they will find it necessary to comply with this requirement for communication. AACSB requirements are as follows:

> C.1.2.c *Standard*: The business curriculum should include written and oral communication as an important characteristic.
>
> C.1.3.c *Standard*: Basic skills in written and oral communication, quantitative analysis, and computer usage should be achieved either by prior experience or education, or as part of the M.B.A. curriculum.
>
> (AACSB, 1991, p. 20).

Indiana University developed new courses for Fall 1995 in listening and oral and written communications. And they have made certain that presentation assignments and teamwork are "infused in classes throughout the curriculum" (p. 15). And other higher learning institutions around the country are taking steps to ensure oral communication. According to New York City College's Dean of Humanities, Theodore Gross, communication is an extremely important subject ranking with sociology, political science, and foreign languages. "One does not justify the study of literature, history, or philosophy in terms of careers . . . One must understand its

[communication's] sociology and history and technology and art and literature because it is the subject of our time and of the future" (Friedrich, np).

As was stated before, many higher learning institutions are adding oral communication in some way to their curricula. But there are many different ideas about how this should be done. This paper will provide a list and explanation of different ways to add oral communication to the curriculum along with a sampling of the universities utilizing each.

Indeed, the lack of students who are prepared in oral communication when entering the job market has caused many people to take notice and attempt to aid students in gaining the skills necessary to be successful. In addition to colleges, the national government has taken an interest in oral communication competency in elementary and secondary schools. As noted in Cronin (1993),

> The U. S. Congress (1978) held that "education agencies" should improve instruction so all children are able to master the basic skills of reading, mathematics, and effective communication, both written and oral. Likewise, the National Governor's Association in conjunction with President Bush adopted national education goals to have students demonstrate an advanced ability to communicate effectively (pp. 37 & 39).

In addition to national interest, post-secondary schools seeking accreditation in the Southern, Western, and Middle States regions must meet the requirements established by their prospective accrediting agencies in regard to oral communication competency. As noted in Cronin (1993), in 1989-1990 the Commission on Colleges and Schools stated that "complete requirements for an associate or baccalaureate degree must include competence in reading,

writing, oral communication and fundamental mathematical skills" (p. 10). The Western Association of Schools and Colleges stated that "the General Education segment requires students to master enabling skills for autonomous learning and to develop an understanding of the fundamental areas of knowledge to include competence in writing and oral communication" (pp. 10 &11). Lastly, the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools informed their member institutions that "while the association would not give them a specific action to take in assessing oral competency, it would be willing to help create a set of case studies of outcomes assessment in oral communication proficiency" (p. 11). The sentiment of the Middle States Association is echoed by all the associations. Although the agencies require their institutions to establish criteria in the curriculum to assess oral competency, the agencies do not tell them how it must be done. Consequently, there have been numerous approaches adopted by schools to include oral communication as part of the curriculum. The purpose of this section is to review and explain three of the more popular approaches addressed in the literature.

According to Cronin et. al. (1993), "colleges and universities have traditionally attempted to ensure oral competence by requiring a single speech communication course for all or most students" (p. 12). This single course is better known as the basic speech course which is either "required" or "recommended" for most students. In general the required course must be taken by every student regardless of major interest. However, the recommended basic course is generally only strongly encouraged to the students. The basic course option tends to be the more popular approach to ensuring oral competency. This point is illustrated in three surveys conducted to examine the role of oral communication in general education curricula.

As noted in Cronin (1993), Hay (1992) found that "50% of the reporting institutions responding to a national survey stated that oral communication was instituted through a single communication course" (p. 15). Similarly, Fleuriet (1992) examined schools which report to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and found that "34% of the institutions require their students to take a single communication course" (p. 16). Even still another study which included two-year community colleges and four-year colleges, Trance et. al. (1989) found that "33% of the community colleges require 'virtually all' of their students to take a basic course compared to 37% of the four-year, non master's degree offering colleges and 48% of the master's degree offering colleges" (p. 18). Consequently, the basic course seems to be viewed as a popular comprehensive option in helping students gain oral skills and understanding.

The basic course also has a specific orientation of focus. Cronin (1993) states that "in order for students to become competent communicators, they must understand the role of their choices and behaviors in the social context, whether public or private, with large audiences or with individual partners, and within and across cultures" (p. 8). Thus, he stresses the importance of students being informed in all areas of communication such as Interpersonal, Small Group and Public Speaking. Nevertheless, a study conducted in 1984 by Gibson et. al. (1985) found that 54% of the reporting schools used Public Speaking as the basic course orientation compared to 34% using a combination of Public Speaking, Interpersonal Communication and Small Group Discussion.

The second more popular approach to help ensure communication competency is oral communication "across the curriculum." Most institutions using this option work toward implementing one of two types of courses Communication Intensive (CI) or Speaking Intensive

(SI). "The communication intensive course is a non-speech course in which a significant oral communication activity is used to enhance learning" (Cronin & Glenn, 1992, p.5). Similarly, the speaking intensive course is in an area other than speech and focuses on speech and communication activities. According to Cronin and Glenn (1992), "the oral communication across the curriculum movement was established based on the "language across the curriculum movement of the 1960's which began in Great Britain" (p.356). The oral communication across the curriculum assumes that students will gain more understanding of oral competency if the principles are emphasized in a variety of courses across the curriculum. Thus, faculty and students in all disciplines are given the opportunity to expand their level of oral competence. According to Cronin (1993), in studies conducted by Hay (1992) and Fleuriet (1992) they found that 33% and 9% respectively of the institutions implemented the across the curriculum approach. Since more institutions have implemented the basic course approach compared to the "across the curriculum" approach, it would seem that schools have found it more beneficial to oversee the management of one course and one segment of the faculty.

Finally, the third approach to ensuring oral competency is through the use of a laboratory. It is important to note that in most cases the laboratory is used in conjunction with the "across the curriculum" approach. Hence, the two together can be referred to as a multiple approach which is noted by Cronin in his 1993 report. Due to the fact that the lab is used in conjunction with the "across the curriculum" approach, the laboratory is largely used as a resource to help those students who are non-communication majors master the communication intensive (CI) courses instituted through the general curriculum. However, the labs are available to all students. The labs generally offer a variety of services such as tutoring, faculty training, and instructional

resources. They are implemented as an extension of the teaching process in order to help students improve the oral communication skills they gain in the classroom. Hence, they provide opportunities for more interaction and feedback in aiding the students' achievement of oral competence.

As stated earlier, universities are given a choice as to how to implement oral communication in the curriculum. Hence, the next section of this paper will sample some of the universities which have attempted to implement either the basic course, communication "across the curriculum" or the laboratory to help their students become orally competent.

The following schools have implemented oral communication courses through a required basic course as reported by Cronin (1993). Colorado Community College implemented a course entitled "Principles of Speech Communication" which is required at 15 state community colleges and is accepted for transfer at 11 state four-year colleges and universities. Similarly, the University of Denver instituted a course entitled "Speech and Thought." Memphis State University took the requirement a step further and had its three credit hour "Fundamentals of Speech" course housed in the Department of Speech Communication. Likewise, Southwest Texas State University modeled its program to be housed in the Department of Speech Communication involving almost all faculty members in lecturing and supervisory roles. They furthermore used graduate and sometimes undergraduate teaching assistants to evaluate the students.

The following schools implemented the basic course, however, only as a recommendation to the students. According to Cronin (1993), North Carolina State University implemented a new component entitled "Writing and Speaking" to its curriculum. The students are required to take

six hours of English composition and rhetoric plus an additional three-hour course in either public speaking, advanced writing or advanced foreign language. West Virginia University implemented "Cluster B" (a section of the core curriculum) which involves courses in communication and other social sciences. Although students must complete 12 hours within cluster B, none of the hours have to be completed in communication.

Cronin and Glenn (1991) found that approximately 20 universities have implemented the "across the curriculum" program. Furthermore, they note that it is unclear whether these courses are required or recommended. Central College, Iowa began its cross curricular program in 1976 making it the oldest cross curricular program to date (Cronin & Glenn, 1991). The school has established speaking and writing centers for the students and faculty to receive training in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Cronin (1993) found at DePauw University, Greencastle, that students must complete one four-hour speaking/listening intensive (SI) course for which they receive two grades. One is (S/U) based on the professor's estimate of the students' competence and the other represents their mastery of course material. Moreover, Hamline University, Minnesota also instituted the (SI) course but stated its course could be completed at any time and in any discipline.

The best known university for its implementation of a laboratory is Radford University. The Radford laboratory is overseen by the Oral Communication Program (OCP) which is designed to help faculty, staff and students develop oral competency and to help faculty incorporate oral communication competency in their various courses. The Radford laboratory is viewed as one of the most comprehensive oral communication labs in existence. There is an Oral Presentation Program which informs students about delivering oral presentations in a variety of

classes. Other programs of the lab include debate, small group communication, listening, coping with speech fright, tutoring and interactive video instruction (of which the OCP is most proud) (Grice & Cronin, 1992). Through interactive video students are able to videotape themselves and others, and they can view videos produced by the OCP.

In 1983 another comprehensive oral communication laboratory was set up by the University of Rhode Island even though the university did not implement a communication "across the curriculum" program (Cronin, 1992). According to Cronin (1992), the Radford and Rhode Island laboratories meet the five basic criteria to be classified as comprehensive for five reasons. First, they are open to all students free of charge. Second, the laboratories serve all university faculty, staff and administrators. Here, Rhode Island even goes a step further to service alumni for a small fee. Third, both labs provide several types of oral communication instruction such as tutoring and faculty support. Additionally, Rhode Island assists students in international instruction. Fourth, both labs offer a variety of instruction such as oral communication activities and coaching during rehearsals of speeches and presentations. Finally, both labs use a wide variety of instructional materials such as interactive video. As a result of the laboratories, it seems students are afforded not only the opportunity to work with faculty but also other students. More important, due to the labs being open to faculty, staff, administrators and even alumni, students are able to come in contact with people similar to those who will be interviewing them for jobs upon graduation.

In conclusion, it has been found that adults spend approximately 80% of the day communicating (Grice & Cronin, 1992). Thus, our ability to agree on symbols and assign meaning is a basic function of life. If communication is a basic function of life then it is also key

to every individual's pursuit of happiness and success. Our sense of who we are, who others are and what objects are is directly related to our ability to communicate effectively. Therefore, just because an individual can relay information does not mean that individual is an effective communicator. Just as we stress the importance of communicating through the written word, we must give equal importance to the spoken word because most of our messages are transmitted orally. We can no longer afford to assume that oral communication is mastered once we learn to speak a particular language; communication entails more than remembering symbols. Communication requires understanding symbols and assigning meaning in various contexts. As a result, it is important that schools include in their curricula aspects of oral communication so students may better be prepared to professionally and socially face life and its challenges.

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